Angela Isenberg: Welcome to I've Tried Everything, a podcast series focusing on behavior support in schools. I'm your host, Angela Isenberg. I'm the program manager for behavior here at the Service Center. Our special guest for this series is Melinda Marquez.

Melinda Marquez: Hi Angela. Behavior is such a hot topic, especially for campus leaders. When I was a principal, I was always looking for guidance around behavior. I think the name of this podcast is great because in fact, I felt like I did try everything.

Angela Isenberg: Our goal with this series is to provide strategies and guidance for campus leaders on how to best support their campus on behavior. We will be sharing insights, our experiences and the things we learned along the way.

Melinda Marquez: So step away from your email, grab that last cup of coffee and let's get started.

Angela Isenberg: Melinda, tell us a little bit about yourself and where you're coming from.

Melinda Marquez: I was a campus principal for years, assistant principal, classroom teacher. Right now I work with schools in need of improvement and work on accountability, so I am able to get onto some campuses, to walk with the principals, do a lot of campus walkthroughs, classroom walkthroughs, and just coach principals around school improvement at this time.

Angela Isenberg: All right. And then I'm sure behavior is obviously something that the principal has talked to you about on those walkthroughs because that is a hot topic out there.

Melinda Marquez: Yes, yes it is.

Angela Isenberg: I'm Angela Isenberg and I am the program manager here for behavior at Region 13, and I wear a lot of different hats here, school-wide implementation, not classroom individual student. Our focus today is going to be on discipline matrix and really looking at how do you set up a systematic approach for what's handled in the classroom versus what's handled in the office. So thinking about those referrals that you got, Melinda, tell me about some of those referrals that you looked at and just kind of shook your head at and said, "How did this end up with me?"

Melinda Marquez: It's interesting because as a principal and an assistant principal, you get a lot of referrals and they are quite different from one another. But some of the ones that stand out to me the most were the ones where I would get a referral from a teacher for a student maybe not having a pencil or not having a sheet of paper, and so the teacher would write the referral, send the student to me. That was always maybe something that was a little bit confusing until you really dug to the root of the problem.

Angela Isenberg: So basically you're talking about me because I remember a stupid referral that I wrote that would fall under that category. I did the cardinal sin in the classroom where you say, "The next person that speaks, I'm going to write you up," and the sweetest kid in my classroom and dropped her pencil and asked her neighbor to pick it up, and me thinking that I had a follow through on what I said, I wrote her up and I remember writing on the referral, "This is a ridiculous referral. I'm so sorry. Please tell her to follow directions and send her back to class." But it's challenging when you put yourself in those situations as a teacher, and then I'm sure as a principal you're looking at it going, "What were they thinking?" Right?

Melinda Marquez: When it comes to that, it's really important. There is a challenge to that because you do want to balance the support of the teacher, but you also want to hold the teacher accountable for their behavior in their classroom. What are you doing in your classroom to address those behaviors? But you didn't want the teacher to feel like you weren't supporting them. So when they wrote the referral, it was important for you to address the referral with the student, but then on the backend, come back and see what's really going on.

Angela Isenberg: One of the things that I heard from a principal that kind of resonated with me is that when a teacher writes the referral, they're upset with the student. When I get the referral, I'm not, so I look through a different lens and how that I'm going to handle that behavior and how that I'm going to handle that incident or infraction. I think one of the most challenging things for teachers is when they write the referral, they want some kind of huge action to take place and they want there to be like, "What did you do to them?" kind of mentality. So tell us a little bit about reactions from teachers on how they responded whenever they would get that referral back and it's a conference.

Melinda Marquez: It's difficult. It is. And that's why it's important to have those systems and processes in place. But there are times when we didn't have those in place. So a student would come with a referral for no pencil, no paper. It would just be a brief conference. I'd give the student a pencil and send them back to class. But the conversation with the teacher afterwards is what's most important for an administrator. You need to explain to the teacher why that was and then like I said, look deeper in the problem. Is there a problem? Exactly what's happening in the class where the teacher is writing that referral, because it's probably more than just that the student didn't have a pencil that one day.

Angela Isenberg: Thinking about the first referral that I ever wrote was for a student in my classroom that called me a stupid witch with a B and it was NCR, days of NCR, and I'm like, capital letters, triple underline. I checked every box that I could think of, insubordination, disrespect, disruption. And I believe that I said ... Actually, I think I know I said this, "Get out and don't come back."

Angela Isenberg: And later that day, at the time, I was Miss Wade, and my assistant principal that was over my grade level asked me to step outside and he said, "Miss Wade, I need to see you for just a second." I said, "Yes, sir." And he said, "I need some clarification on this referral you wrote." I said, "Yes, sir," and he said, "I need to know what you're more upset about, being called stupid because I know you have a college education or being called a" ... and I kind of laughed, and he said, "Angela, I gave him a consequence for that behavior." He said, "How are you going to welcome him back in your classroom?" And I just kind of looked at him, my 23-year-old self kind of going, "What?"

Angela Isenberg: It was my first introduction as a teacher that I might find that behavior deplorable, but I shouldn't find the student deplorable. And I think when you look at that, that's what you're talking about when you come back, and he handled the referral, but it was that followup to come back and say, "Okay Angela, what are you going to do differently next time?" What is this going to look like so that I don't do capital letters and triple underline and check everything on the referral kind of action. And again, it's because I was upset when I wrote that referral.

Melinda Marquez: Right. We saw that a lot as campus administrative team. When teachers write referrals, it's normally the end of the line. They've tried different things and maybe nobody's guided them on what to try in the classroom, but they felt like they've tried everything and so they're going to write this referral and the student has finally gotten on their last nerve, so we would get those referrals where things were triple underlined, capital letters, lots of opinions in there.

Melinda Marquez: We had to train our staff to let them know that these are part of their record, goes home to parents, so anything you write on there is seen by everyone. So we did have to train staff on how to write a referral, what does that look like, what language do you need to use. Let's not capitalize and bold and underline and use 12 exclamation marks on something and let's not use any opinions, or maybe you need to give this child ISS, which I used to get that, but it's just training your staff on those systems and processes.

Angela Isenberg: That's a great point. I think that one of the things that we forget is that a lot of folks in their education programs prior to coming to the classroom aren't taught how to write a referral, so they don't have that experience to be able to go back and say, "This is what should be included. These are our key points that we need to make sure that we make." So thinking about that as being one of the great key points to do, the other side is that discipline matrix. What was on your discipline matrix? What was included as part of it as a campus principal?

Melinda Marquez: I'm Melinda Marquez and we'll get back to today's episode in just a second. If you like what you hear in this episode, hop on over to whatever platform you use and give us a rating and a review. It helps people find our podcast and helps us know what we can improve upon. Thanks. Now, let's get back to the show.

Melinda Marquez: Well, I guess it depends on which version we're talking about because once we figured out that teachers were at the end of their line when they came to writing a referral, we decided that we needed to talk about exactly what behaviors need to be handled in the classroom by the teacher. That's one column. And the next column is what constitutes writing a discipline referral. And that doesn't mean the child's pulled out of class, but they write the referral and then the referral is sent to the office, and then whenever the principal or assistant principal has time, then they'd pull the child to have the conversation with them, or what is an immediate removal from the classroom.

Melinda Marquez: So that's kind of the first version of our discipline matrix, but we progress, after rolling it out the first year, looking at it at the end of the year, seeing how it worked, we realized that teachers need to have ... what interventions can they use in the classroom? What is something that they can implement in the classroom? What does that look like? So that's where that training comes in.

Angela Isenberg: That's awesome, so it's really a guide for teachers of, "What should I handle? What should I be doing in the classroom? And then here are things that I can do. You're telling me I have to do these, so here are some strategies to put in."

Melinda Marquez: Yes.

Angela Isenberg: If your campus is using restorative practices, this is where you could easily put in some of those restorative practices of using an affective statement or those restorative questions as an impromptu conversation with a student, so those practices could be included in your discipline matrix.

Angela Isenberg: One of the things that I think a lot of campuses struggle with is the gray area, and that is that middle ground. We can really list things that classroom teachers should be handling in the classroom. No pencil, no paper, tapping, but that gray area of those persistent misbehaviors, it's when does it lead to a referral? What happens if that minor horseplay moves into more moderate horseplay where it's beginning to be unsafe, there's an issue that's starting to arise with it, where it's lingering and it's affecting the class dynamics, and really looking at that process that you would go through of, how do you document? What is something that you would always expect a classroom teacher to have done prior to writing those persistent misbehaviors?

Melinda Marquez: One of the key things that we ask teachers to do is make sure they contact the parents. And I know that sometimes it's not easy to contact the parents. Either you can't get in touch with them or maybe the parents aren't open or receptive to the phone call from the classroom teacher, but it was just imperative that the teacher contact the parent before sending them to the office for persistent misbehavior, because if I contacted a parent and said, "Well, this has been happening," the teacher says this has been happening for the last three weeks, and then the parent says, "Well, no one ever told me that this was happening or else I would have fixed it at home." So we really wanted to make sure that the teacher contact the parent.

Angela Isenberg: One of the things that I think teachers feel like is they have to be consistent, like every infraction has to have the same consequence. And it's helping people to understand that fair doesn't always mean equal in the world of behavior. And what we do for one student might not be the same exact thing that we do for another student, but we have to think of it as, how are we helping to support that?

Angela Isenberg: You made a comment in there that some parents are like, "Yes, I will handle this. I will talk with them. I expect behavior to change. I want a call back to let me know." Sometimes that's just communication with parents because parents are struggling with behavior too at home and they don't know how to address behavior themselves. So it's definite communication, but for some it's not a consequence when we call parents. They're going, "I don't know what to do." So really thinking through how do you have a great array of consequences and really thinking around what are some logical consequences, what's natural consequences, what are some things that really pair appropriately with that student.

Angela Isenberg: If you've sat a kid out at recess, which I'm not ever an advocate for, but if you sat a kid out at recess and they've haven't experienced a full recess since the beginning of the school year, recess isn't the appropriate consequence for that student because it's not changing behavior. It's not impacting behavior at all, so really thinking through how are we managing and looking at that array.

Melinda Marquez: And that's why it's so important when you're having these conversations, when an administrative team is having these conversation around these things just that you're talking about, that this conversation is had with your campus staff. It can't just come top down and saying, "This is what we're going to do." Teachers need to know the why. Why are we doing this? What does this look like? When do I write this referral? Because if you don't train the staff and you just hand them a discipline matrix, it's not going to work.

Angela Isenberg: The other effective way that I've seen this work is if they have a campus PBIS team or behavior team and that team works at crafting the discipline matrix and then that team goes back to their smaller groups of whoever they're representing and talks about their feedback, gets their feedback on it and then it's brought back to the committee and finalized that way. I think you're right. It's more than just handing the document or saying it's in the share drive in the folder. It's about really training them of walking through.

Angela Isenberg: I've seen some campuses that have added a positive column in there to kind of think around how do we positively impact students proactively before we have to go into the reactive pieces of that, and I think again, you'd have to look at your staff. Are they in need of some strategies of how to provide positive feedback for students, doing the behavior appropriately, and that might address the behavior before we even have to go into a reactive consequence. So things like that might be essential for campuses to have. One of the key pieces we would want staff to walk away with is that once they write the referral, they're giving up all power and authority to make decisions of what happens with that infraction.

Melinda Marquez: That's right. That's something we definitely had to talk to the staff about because when you take the referral and you write it and you send the student out of your classroom, you've given up control of the discipline of that child over to someone else, and that should be the last option for the teacher because we want to make sure those teachers have the control of the behavior management in their classroom and how important that is.

Angela Isenberg: The other piece is really thinking around those immediate removals. What are those phone calls? What are those radio calls for immediate removal? I think one of the things that people are crafty about is skirting around policies and practices and kind of making things work for them. So as a principal, you guys are held under really scrutiny for accountability of referrals and the number of referrals. Talk to me about that pressure that you felt as a principal.

Melinda Marquez: Yeah. For a district, in order to gather data on discipline on campuses, it's a difficult process and I can see how that would be difficult. So one of the tools that they use is how many referrals does each campus have. When we had our meetings, we would get papers handed out and say, "This is how many referrals this campus has, this how many referrals this campus has. Let's look at these referrals. Let's see what we can do to reduce the referrals." That's when that ... I like the word you used, crafty. We came up with various scenarios on how to reduce referrals. What can we do to not write a referral but still provide the teachers the support? So maybe we did an office reflection form or a principal conference form that's not an official referral.

Angela Isenberg: And so then you're seeing these soft referrals, counseling forms, as well as referrals. But when your administration looks at it, they say, "Wow, you've reduced your discipline. You're down to 13 referrals for the first semester," but you're been working your tail off and all of these soft referrals and counseling forms that aren't documented and so I think it's a hard place for principals to be put in of, again, how are you supporting your teachers and then doing all the other things that you have to do along with behavior.

Angela Isenberg: The other piece to those soft referrals that I've seen quite a bit are radio calls. I've encountered an elementary campus this past year that I was working with, and within a five week span of time, she had over 400 radio calls from classrooms saying, "I need you, I need you," and she was dropping everything that she was doing and rushing to those classrooms because she was thinking it was an emergency and it would be a student tore up their paper, student is under the desk and won't come out, not disrupting the class, not disrupting anybody, but just under their desk. And so I had her start documenting how many radio calls she was getting, because we would be in a conference and she couldn't even finish the meeting with me without having to run maybe three, four times during that hour long session that we had to plan for our campus to go in and put these fires out all over.

Melinda Marquez: Yeah. So what that sounds like is that the teachers were using the radio as their discipline management in their classroom.

Angela Isenberg: So really, thinking around what does classroom management look like? And that is going to be our next series and next podcast in this series of really looking at how do we help teachers manage their classrooms effectively so we are not the managers of everything and they can take the power back and the control can be shifted back into the classroom.

Melinda Marquez: That sounds great. Yeah.

Angela Isenberg: Thank you for joining us for our first behavior podcast of I've Tried Everything. On next week's episode, we're going to talk about classroom management and through that principal's lens, what are you expecting every classroom to have for classroom management and how do you effectively teach teachers to make sure that they're utilizing those tools? If you liked what you've heard so far, don't forget to subscribe, rate, and review us. I'm Angela Isenberg.

Melinda Marquez: And I'm Melinda Marquez. We'll see you next week.